

“On the Shoulders of Giants”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (All Saints Observed)
November 5, 2017

First Scripture Reading: Matthew 16:13-20

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Second Scripture Reading: 1st Peter 2:1-10

¹Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. ²Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— ³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in scripture: “See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” ⁷To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,” ⁸and “A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. ⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.



Sermon: “On the Shoulders of Giants”

Today we observe All Saints day in the church. This observance originated in the church’s desire to honor martyrs of the faith with a special feast day dedicated to each one. At some point, however, perhaps due to the vigor and efficiency with which Roman Emperors persecuted Christians, there came to be more martyrs than there were days in the year on which to honor them. So, one day was set aside to honor all the martyrs of the church: All Saints Day. Some parts of the greater church began to venerate many of those saints and make miraculous claims about them. Many of these saints were raised to a level where it was believed they could serve as intermediaries between humans and God.

The reformers, however, began to think differently about such things. And today when *we* talk about the Saints in our modern Presbyterian tradition, we mean something very different. In our tradition all believers are saints; not because we are so good, but because we have been *sanctified* by God.

In his New Testament writings, the Apostle Paul repeatedly makes reference to “the saints.” But Paul doesn’t believe “the saints” are somehow superior in their behavior. Paul believes that Christians have been *sanctified* by God, which is a fancy word that means to make something holy. When he addresses his first letter to the church in Corinth “to the saints” he is writing to the whole congregation which is made up of regular people, sinners one and all, but people who have been made holy, through Christ Jesus.¹ Through our baptisms we are marked as God’s own and we are sanctified; we are made acceptable and holy unto God, washed and made new for service to God.² For Paul, members of the church are called “saints,” not because of what they had accomplished, but because of who they are in Christ.

And so, in our reformed Presbyterian tradition, we do not set individuals apart as being more worthy of praise for things they have done. We do not venerate individuals, nor do we seek intercession from those we may consider heroes of the faith. But we do honor and give thanks to God for all of those who have gone before us, who helped to make the church what it is, and who helped to form and shape us into the people that we are today.

There’s an old Turkish proverb that says “One stone does not make a wall.” I know this to be true because I’ve built one, you see. When I was in college, I once bricked a guy into his room. Three of my friends helped me build a five-foot by four-foot brick wall in front of another friend’s door, in the middle of the night. When he woke up the next morning and opened his door, what he expected to see, was what he had seen every morning for the previous four years: a wide-open dormitory hallway spilling out before him. What he saw was 20 square feet of solid grey cinder-block majesty.

University Police had to come tear it down and let him out. The RA on duty that morning told me later “I swear Bill, it looked solid, like it had been standing there forever.”

When I’ve told that story before, people seem perplexed at how a small group of college students could have managed it. But it wasn’t that hard, really. Brick walls are, in their very essence, just one block stacked on top of another. Oh sure, you have to stagger them, for the sake of structural integrity and you have to keep things even and straight or before long, the whole thing is leaning over. But at its core, a wall, or any structure really, is just a pile of materials stacked on top of each other, carefully, with a great deal of engineering know-how and a whole lot of fasteners. And each level depends on the one below it being strong and having been made stable.

From the Great Wall of China, to the Empire State Building, right down to that little wall we built in our college residence hall 20-some years ago, every one of them is composed of many small parts, added in stages, supporting each other, providing stability and strength for the ones that come next.

And that is how the church is built, too. Oh, in a very literal way, this building is constructed of bricks and mortar and stone stacked strategically in an esthetically pleasing and structurally sound way. But the church is not the building, and as God builds God’s Kingdom, the church is an integral part of it, and the church is built on the lives and witness and service of all those who have been, are, and will be a part of it.

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:2, NRSV

² 1 Corinthians 6:11, NRSV

When you think of Overbrook, you probably think of this place and these people. But all of this and all of us, are here in part, because of what generations of Christians have done before us. So many of the institutions we know and love are the result of years of work and dedication by those who came before.

When you think about Ohio State football, you probably think of Meyer and Barrett and Weber, but none of what Ohio State football is today would be, if not for the foundation laid by Spielman (Chris) and Griffin (Archie) and Hayes (Woody) and Horvath (Les), and Harley (Chic).

When we think of what this country is, for better or worse, we tend to think of Trump, and Obama, and Bush, but whatever they have accomplished has been built on a foundation laid by people like King (Martin Luther, Jr.), and Anthony (Susan), and Franklin (Benjamin) and Jefferson (Thomas).

But even more so, those institutions were built on a foundation of people whose names you've probably never heard before and wouldn't recognize if you did. And that's like the Church.

When Peter declared his belief that Jesus was the son of God, Jesus replied that Peter and perhaps more importantly, the faith he professed, would be the building blocks on which Jesus would build His church. And 1st Peter echoes that idea urging early Christians saying "...like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house..." that has Christ as the corner stone.

Some of us have only been a part of Overbrook Church for a handful of years. Last month was my five-year service anniversary here and some of you have joined this congregation more recently than that. But what we all found here upon our arrival was a worshipping community built on a foundation of thousands of people who came before us.

The building in which we worship and study and fellowship, was built and paid for by faithful people who were a part of this community long ago. Our mission to the Clintonville-Beechwood Community Resource Center and the YWCA Family Center Shelter and the Open Shelter go back many years to members and staff who first started our ministries with the poor and homeless. But even they, took on work that was begun by others before them.

In 1915, just a little over a century ago, a group of 39 Christians answered God's call to form a new congregation, gathering to worship in a small metal building on the corner of Oakland Park Avenue and Broadway Court. They called themselves Oakland Park Presbyterian Church. That congregation eventually outgrew its space, and moved to a new home, here at the intersection of Croswell Road and High Street, changing its name to Overbrook Presbyterian Church. Those first 39 members and the thousands of people who have made this church their spiritual home since, are a solid foundation on which you and I now stand.

But those first 39 did not stand alone, because they stood on a foundation of nurture in this presbytery and by the church in other places before they gathered to start this one. And those church homes that fostered the faith of our forefathers and mothers, themselves grew from the spread of Christianity to the new world from the old.

This week, the world witnessed the 500th anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation, a revolution that shook the world and spawned such great theologians as John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli, whose participation in that movement grew into what we now know as the Presbyterian Church. But even those reformers, including Martin Luther whose 95 theses brought a long-simmering reformation

movement into the light, were the product of 1500 years of Christian thought and discipleship. They stood on a foundation that had been built and added to over a millennium and a half. And that foundation was built on the commitment of the first disciples, humble tradesmen who answered Jesus' call to follow him.

And those first Christians were really Jews and they themselves stood on an ancient foundation of Judaism. Remember, Jesus was not trying to start a new religion, he was trying to reform an old one; a religious tradition that goes all the way back to Abraham, a herdsman called by God to leave his father's land, the only home he had ever known, to go to a place that God would show him; a land of promise. God blessed Abraham and through him, and his descendants, the nation of Israel, all the world would be blessed.

But even before there was Abraham, before Israel, before Judaism, God was active in the world, forming, calling, teaching, urging creation into being. Our faith in general and this congregation in particular stands on a foundation as ancient as the world itself. We trace our own practice of the faith as far back as human memory takes us and beyond.

So, what we do here, is not new. And if we have accomplished something, or been faithful in our worship or in our service, in large part, we can thank those who came before us.

Sir Isaac Newton once famously gave credit to those great minds who had come before him writing "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." But that idea has been traced back to Bernard of Chartres, a 12th century French Philosopher who compared his contemporaries to "[little people] perched on the shoulders of giants. [Stating] that we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature."³

We are heirs to something grander that we can even comprehend. Our traditions, our faith, our mission in the world, has all been passed to us by those faithful generations who came before us. They were the building blocks that form the foundation on which we continue building today. If we have seen farther or accomplished more, it is because we stand on the firm foundation that has been provided to us. And our faith and good works as the church will provide the foundation on which the next generation of the church will be built.

When we observe All Saints Day, we are recognizing the gifts to the church that God has given us in the form of *all* of those believers in every time and place who have shared their faith with us and who have handed down the knowledge and understanding of God through the generations. We thank God for those disciples who walk beside us and for those who have gone before us; for their contributions to our lives and faith and for God's work in and through them.

So, as we read the names of those who have passed away this year, we will do so not as a sort of wistful tribute. But in honor of them and their contributions, and in thanksgiving to God for blessing us with these men and women in our lives and in the life of the church. And as we remember them, we will be looking forward with anticipation to the future when we will be reunited with them and all of the saints in the Kingdom of God.

³ "Standing on the Shoulders of Giants." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 5 Nov. 2017, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standing_on_the_shoulders_of_giants.